

Ask anyone who follows the news whether they worry about Asian carp finding their way into our Great Lakes, and more often than not they'll say yes.

But ask them whether, in an unproven strategy to block the carp, we should destroy businesses and jobs by closing two major Illinois locks that connect the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes, and they might very well answer differently.

Solving the problem of invading Asian carp, which threaten the Great Lakes' fragile ecosystem, will take multi-state cooperation and common sense -- not a fast overreaction that threatens jobs and businesses.

Michigan and five other states with a direct stake in the health of the Great Lakes contend that closing the Chicago lock at the mouth of the Chicago River and the O'Brien lock on the Calumet River is the only way to stem the tide of the invasive carp. On Dec. 21, the attorney general of Michigan filed a lawsuit asking the U.S. Supreme Court to close the two locks.

But while blocking the carp is an important priority, Michigan's lawsuit amounts to a tacit willingness to sacrifice billions of dollars in commerce, thousands of jobs and basic common sense -- all in pursuit of a solution that by no means is sure to work.

Every year, billions of dollars worth of goods are moved along Illinois waterways, including much of the region's oil, cement, iron, coal and agricultural goods. Delays in the transport of these goods could result in higher electricity, gasoline and road construction costs, as well as layoffs by companies dependent on waterway shipments.

In 2008, more than 6.9 million tons of goods were moved through the Chicago and O'Brien locks, and 8,500 jobs are tied to port activities at these two locks. If the locks were closed, these millions of tons of goods would have to be transported by truck on the Chicago area's already congested roadways, increasing traffic and emissions and creating safety problems.

According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, permanently closing the Chicago and O'Brien locks also would place much of metro Chicago at great risk of flood damage and could threaten the city's water supply.

The Obama administration largely agreed with this assessment in a memo filed with the Supreme Court on Tuesday.

Michigan deserves credit for moving to meet the Asian carp threat head-on, and the entire Great Lakes region should join them in the fight. The Great Lakes, among the world's true natural wonders, are precious to all of us, a blessing both financially and aesthetically. And it will take all of us, working together, to ensure that no Asian carp find their way into Lake Michigan. But any sensible solution must take a balanced approach, weighing the environmental and economic impact.

We must stop the carp. But we also must respect and protect our vital commercial waterways.

***Written by Congresswoman Halvorson, this opinion piece was originally published in the January 10, 2010 edition of the Chicago Sun-Times***